

Peter Denman

Poet and Mastercraftsman

Michael Hartnett, *Collected Poems*, Gallery Books, 2001, £13.95 pb, £25.00 hb.

When Michael Hartnett died just over two years ago there was a widely felt sorrow and sense of loss among those who knew him or his poetry. As well as being a poet, Michael had been a character, lovable and irascible, who seemed destined to enter into the anecdotage that exists around the fringe of Irish literature. This book of his *Collected Poems* is welcome as a necessary corrective to that. Gallery Books has recently enhanced its canon-making tendency by publishing handsome "collecteds" of our senior contemporary poets: Derek Mahon, John Montague, Richard Murphy. The Hartnett volume appears posthumously, but such was not the intention when the book was planned by Hartnett himself and his editor and publisher Peter Fallon. It was published at the time envisaged, which would have been Hartnett's sixtieth birthday. Circumstances have meant that this volume takes on a more definitive cast than it otherwise would have, and it is good to have such a span of Hartnett's poems, covering forty years, between a single set of covers. (There was a two-volume and rather premature *Collected Poems* from Hartnett's first publisher, Raven Arts, in the 1980s.)

The range of Hartnett's work was astonishingly various. He moved between a number of publishers. In the 1980s he famously switched from English to Irish for a number of years, just when his career was at its most active. An important element of his writing consists of translations, from the Spanish and especially from the Irish of Ó Bruadair, Ó Rathaille and Haicéad. He could turn out an accomplished ballad or piece of light verse. These are not part of the *Collected Poems*, and will feature in promised further volumes.

What we have gives us poems from the late 1950's up to some uncollected pieces from the very end of his life. The book ends with two short poems 'The Blink of an Eye' and 'A Prayer for Sleep' which movingly stand as his real farewell – to English, to poetry, and to life. The former is the shortest poem in the book, apart from the haiku:

I see the Morning Star
through my childhood skylight
and close my eyes and dream for fifty years,
reliving every set-back, every high-light;

I open my eyes and there's the Evening Star.
And suddenly it's twilight.

Looking over the 230 pages of poems individually is to be reminded that Hartnett had an individual voice. The earliest work was always interesting, but it sometimes strained for effect, with extreme imagery of hysteria and mutilation (this was the 1960s, after all) combined with a rather mannered language. He moved beyond this, although the violent imagery was always liable to recur, for instance in poems like 'A Visit to Castletown House', and even in the other valedictory poem 'A Prayer for Sleep', where, in the middle of an invocation for rest and harmless dreaming, there is an awareness of people like "hyenas... / whose laughing hides a Stone Age howl, / who wait till darkness comes to pounce / and tear the guts of progress out." His poems were often raw, sometimes with a jagged and unpolished quality; it was his strength that this could add to their effect rather than detract from it. And, as his light verse and the various exercises in conventional inherited forms show, he was technically knowledgeable and adept.

But, looking over Hartnett's career as a whole as this book enables us to do, what strikes one is that it is difficult to locate the centre of it: which volume or group of poems shows Hartnett at his typical and best? Where is the poetic centre of gravity that identifies and locates him in our consciousness: the equivalent of Mahon's 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' or Montague's *The Rough Field* or Heaney's bog poems? There is really no such identifier for Hartnett's work. Perhaps the poems in the 1980s, which was the signal decade in his career when he was rewarded with prizes, and published *A Farewell to English* with poems like 'Death of An Irishwoman' and 'A Visit to Castletown House'. But it was immediately after this that he stopped publishing in English for a number of years. When he resumed it was with the *Inchicore Haiku*, and the haiku is too restrained to be anything more than a test-piece. The continuity was broken. A couple of years later, his *Poems to Younger Women* is almost a new beginning; in many respects every new collection of his seemed like a new beginning. This is an indication of a vital and self-renewing spirit,

but it poses problems when one tries to encapsulate a life's work. This resistance to categorisation is probably one of the reasons why Hartnett has not figured as prominently as he might in critical accounts of recent Irish poetry, as Justin Quinn observed in passing in *PIR* 70.

There are some fine long and meditative poems from his later life in this *Collected Poems*: 'The Man who Wrote Yeats, the Man who Wrote Mozart' and 'Sibelius in Silence'. But perhaps the centre of Hartnett's work is to be found in his translations from Ó Bruadair, Ó Rathaille and Haicéad. These achieve a sustained note in working through the voices of the poets from a tradition that he could never shake off. This is the confluence of his English and his Irish; he was too strong a poet to be subordinated to the voices of great predecessors, but was able to use them to modulate his own. Without the translations, the *Collected Poems* is certainly incomplete. Denis Devlin and Padraic Fallon are earlier poets whose work is gathered in twin volumes that separate their "collected poems" from their translations. For those two it is arguable that the poetic translations were foundational and subordinate to their "own" work. With Hartnett, his translations are integral to his overall achievement; especially those from the three early Irish poets, but also his versions of Lorca and the Tao, and his translations of contemporary Irish poetry. He was the first (and most faithful?) translator of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and he also translated his own Irish poems. He himself called another notable Irish poet and translator, Thomas Kinsella, the "poet as mastercraftsman"; if Hartnett is to be accorded the status he deserves, of poet and mastercraftsman, we need the translations as well as these remarkable poems.